

# Getting Kids to Eat Well & Be Active



The essential talking and  
listening skills parents need

Sponsored by Weight Watchers International, Inc.  
and the American Health Foundation.

# Introduction



A child with healthy eating and activity habits is more likely to enjoy a healthier life. Parents play a key role in helping their children establish these life-long habits. The dramatic rise in the number of American children who are

overweight or at risk for

being overweight – estimated as one in four – is concerning because weight problems are associated with poor eating habits and a sedentary lifestyle. The effects of unchecked weight gain in children are evident as more children are developing obesity-related diabetes. As much as fifty percent of obese adolescents will be obese as adults, and the likelihood increases when one or both parents are obese. This sets them up for increasing their risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and certain forms of cancer.

As a parent, you are the gatekeeper to your child's health. That's why Weight Watchers and the American Health Foundation have teamed up to empower you with strategies for communicating with your child in ways that will effectively steer him or her toward eating well and being active.

After reading this booklet, you will better understand how your child's habits, behaviors, and self-esteem develop, and the key role you play in shaping them. Most importantly, you will learn that being an active listener will help open the doors of communication between you and your child.

We hope you will start right away discussing with your child the importance of eating well and being active. What you teach your child today can last a lifetime.

Myron Winick, M.D.  
Medical Director  
Weight Watchers International, Inc.

Dan Nixon, M.D.  
President  
American Health Foundation

# How Children Develop Habits

Children begin to develop habits as soon as they are born. In fact, infants even enter the world with sensible eating habits! Their natural appetite "thermostat" tells them to eat when they're hungry and to stop when they're full. That's why pediatricians encourage parents to feed very young children "on demand" and allow them to control how much they drink and eat.

Preschoolers enjoy copying the behaviors of their parents; they want to grow up to be just like you. If you enjoy taking a walk after dinner, they probably will too. They'll also copy some, but not all, of your eating habits (after all, preschoolers are known for their pickiness!). And as they get older, their eating habits are likely to resemble yours even more.

The environment in your home – the food, eating schedule, available toys and sports equipment – is a strong influence on your child's eating and activity habits. Children are more likely to choose healthful snacks when foods like fruits and vegetables are readily available. They are less apt to graze throughout the afternoon and evening when a schedule is set for meals and snacks. A playroom or garage stocked with balls and jump ropes may entice your child to choose physical activity rather than television.

**It's never too soon to encourage good habits, and it's never too late!**



# Knowing Your Child's Preferences and Behaviors



Every child has definite likes, dislikes, behaviors, and attitudes. The more familiar you are with your child's individualities, the easier it will be for you to communicate with him or her about a healthy lifestyle.

Where do children learn to do what they do? Some of their behavior is inborn. Other behaviors are learned by watching you and other family members. Children also adapt their behaviors to their home environment – they learn to eat and play at certain times and not at others.

As children get older, their family and home environment have less influence on their preferences and behaviors and their world outside of home has more. The likes, dislikes, and behaviors of older children begin to be shaped by their friends, teachers, television, advertisements, popular music, computer and video games, and other influences.

Food likes and dislikes in particular reflect a combination of inborn preferences, parental influence, and outside factors.

- Infants are born with preferences for particular flavors and especially for foods and liquids that taste sweet.



## Your Child's Self-esteem

Self-esteem, your child's sense of worth, is a critical element in your child's health. Children with good self-esteem are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyle habits because feeling good inside leads them to do positive things for themselves. Conversely, children with low self-esteem may feel stressed and dissatisfied with their body. As a parent, you can boost your child's self-esteem by:

- Praising positive behavior rather than criticizing the negative behavior.
- Speaking to your child in a non-aggressive tone.
- Not criticizing your child's appearance. Criticism may cause your child to severely restrict his or her eating.
- Refraining from teasing your child about his or her appetite or weight.
- Being prepared if your adolescent becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his or her body – it's normal among some teenagers.



“Instilling healthy eating habits requires understanding and a loving give-and-take on the rules.”

-Sarah, Duchess of York,  
Weight Watchers  
Spokesperson

- Toddlers may sometimes resist trying new foods. You may have to serve the same food up to 10 times before your toddler will try it.

- Infants and toddlers stop eating when they're full. Parents who force children to clean their plates undo this natural calorie-control system.



- Young children won't eat what they don't like. The harder you push, the more they may say no.
- Some research suggests that children whose parents strictly limit and control high-fat, high-calorie foods may actually start preferring them because they are "forbidden," then refuse to eat a variety of foods.

Activity preferences are both inborn – think of the newborn who seems to never stop moving – and learned, primarily in school. Because many schools have cut back or cut out their physical activity requirements and classes, students are becoming more sedentary. However, a child whose parents and friends are active is more apt to enjoy a more active lifestyle.

# Talking With Your Children About a Healthy Lifestyle



Now it's time to start the dialogue with your children about healthy eating and an active lifestyle. The next few pages of this booklet offer tips and suggestions for improving communication so that you can positively influence your child's behavior. Try one or two at first, rather than all of them at once – it takes time to change ingrained habits.

It may be that you and your children already have conflicts over food and physical activity. Your past efforts at talking with your children may not have been all that successful. Rather than abandon your efforts, take the time to begin anew, utilizing the three-part strategy that follows: building rapport, being a role model, and creating a supportive home environment.

**Building rapport** is developing a two-way, mutual communication so that each of you listens to the other. Even if there's disagreement, the two of you are open to hearing what the other has to say. Don't be discouraged if your past communication efforts have been unsuccessful. When you commit to being in rapport, you will find strategies that work for the two of you.

## First, evaluate yourself:

- Examine your current communication style. Are you a listener or a talker? Do you truly hear what your child is saying? Does your child feel that you are listening and understanding?
- Listen to the tone of your own voice. Is it positive or negative, supportive or condescending? Role play with a friend by pretending that your friend is your child, and ask for honest feedback.
- Do you often talk about your or your child's weight or body size? Research shows that children are more likely to become dieters when their weight is important to their mother or father.





- What tone of voice do you use when expressing your opinions? Your child is more apt to listen when you speak in a non-judgmental manner.
- Have you been taking control of and responsibility for your child's eating and physical activity? Instead, help your child find tools that allow him or her to take charge and make decisions.
- Are your expectations realistic? Work toward small, gradual improvements rather than major changes.



**Next, take a new approach** when talking with your child about healthy eating and an active lifestyle.

- Let your child know that you are working together as a team. Encourage all family members to "play on the same team."
- Understand each child's temperament, personality, and communication style. You may need to communicate differently with each of your children.
- Communicate with each child at the appropriate level. For example, a 10-year-old and a 15-year-old have different levels of understanding and different motivations.
- Ask your child questions to draw him or her into the conversation. Phrase questions in a way that invites a response rather than a yes/no answer.

- Think before you speak so that you talk to your child the way you would want to be spoken to.
- Refrain from making negative comments about your child's appearance, such as mentioning that a pair of pants is getting too tight. A seemingly innocent comment from a parent can spark abnormal eating habits – including starving or bingeing – in a child.

- Help your child discover his or her own reasons, or motivations, for improved eating and physical activity.

- Work with your child on developing a rational system for making decisions about food, exercise, and other aspects of life. When a child offers you a problem, don't offer an immediate solution. Instead, encourage the child to think of alternatives, then discuss their pros and cons to help identify which solution will work the best.



- Share your own feelings, frustrations, challenges, and successes about healthy eating and an active lifestyle.
- Make an extra effort to listen to your child, especially if your child doesn't listen to you.

The child who doesn't listen may be crying out for attention.

- Give your child positive feedback without overdoing it or being insincere.
- Understand and accept your child as he or she is, and your child will feel better about himself.
- Expect some conflicts with your children, especially adolescents — it's normal!





**Being a role model** is essential since children form most of their behaviors by observing others, including their parents. Information alone will not change your child's behavior – you have to “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk.”

- Develop a positive body image. Avoid criticizing your own weight and body size in front of your child; it sends the message that your self-worth depends on your weight.
- Improve your attitude about your own eating and activity habits. Parents who are frustrated about their own diet, lack of physical activity, and weight may deal with their

frustration by trying to tightly control the eating and activities of their children.

- Be consistent in your own eating and activity habits and in your attitudes about a healthy lifestyle. Avoid sending mixed messages.

“Perhaps the most important thing you can do to get your child to eat well and be active is to set a good example.”

- Dr. Myron Winick

- Set an example by eating healthfully and fitting regular physical activity into your day.
- Be a role model without talking about it. Your child is more likely to copy your behavior if not pushed or forced into it.



**Creating a supportive home environment**, both the physical environment and the way that family members interact with each other, provides your child with many of the tools needed to develop healthy eating habits and an active lifestyle.

- Make a family commitment to a healthier lifestyle. If your child is the only one making changes, he or she may feel deprived, singled out, or resentful.
- Encourage other family members – your spouse, other children, parents, in-laws – to be supportive of the child and of each other.
- Establish regular meal and snack times rather than having an open kitchen around the clock.
- Stock the kitchen with a choice of healthy options, and limit temptations at home. However, don't overly restrict your child's access to favorite foods. It can affect a child's ability to regulate his or her eating.
- Keep the garage or playroom stocked with plenty of balls and other sports and activity equipment.
- Look for activities you can do together. Take a walk with your child after dinner; it's a great time to catch up on the events of the day.

“The good habits your child learns today will help insure that he or she has a healthy tomorrow.”

-Dr. Daniel W. Nixon

- Support your child's experience of having some control over his or her lifestyle. Research shows that when parents consistently impose their opinion upon their child's decision process, the child becomes less confident of his or her ability to make independent decisions.

- Keep this advice in mind: Your job, as a parent, is to decide what food goes on the table. Your child's job is to decide what, whether, and how much to eat.

# If Your Child Is Overweight



The overweight child can benefit from all of the advice and strategies discussed on the previous pages. In addition, parents need to tailor their communication in a way that is sen-

sitive to how it affects their child's self-image.

- Make healthy eating habits and an active lifestyle the primary goal. Weight management should be secondary.
- Discuss whether your child wants to adopt healthier eating and activity habits. If he or she is not ready, efforts are not likely to work and may hurt self-esteem. Also, evaluate whether your family is ready to change. A family that is not ready to change can undermine the efforts of your overweight child.



- Present your child with different healthy alternatives and allow the child to choose among them. Children feel better when they can make choices. Since feeling in control breeds confidence, their choices can lead to habits.

- Work together to help your child get in touch with his or her feelings of hunger and fullness. Encourage your child to stop eating when satisfied.
- Discuss strategies for including favorite foods in your child's diet. Allow your child to decide which foods to limit or eliminate.



- Don't be a "food cop" who strictly controls what and how much your child eats. This could lead to overeating when you are not around and does not teach a child how to be in control of his or her eating.
- Don't describe behaviors or foods as "good" or "bad."
- Help your child find physical activities that he or she enjoys. Encourage him or her to pursue them as much as possible. Be patient if his or her interests change.
- Work with your child's school to modify and personalize his or her activity schedule to your child's needs and sensitivities. Overweight children may be self-conscious about doing certain activities.
- If you are concerned that your child is overweight, you are encouraged to discuss this with your child's doctor to create a plan of action. Keep in mind that your overweight child may not actually need to lose weight. Just holding a steady weight while your child grows may allow him or her to "grow into it."

This booklet and its list of references is available online at [www.weightwatchers.com](http://www.weightwatchers.com), where you can also find additional tips on helping your child eat well and be active.



# Weight Watchers.

Weight Watchers International, Inc., headquartered in Woodbury, New York is recognized as the leading name in safe and sensible weight loss and a company dedicated to promoting a healthy weight and a healthy lifestyle among all Americans. To learn more about Weight Watchers and use the Meeting Finder, visit [www.weightwatchers.com](http://www.weightwatchers.com) or for information about meeting locations, call 800-651-6000.



The American Health Foundation (AHF) is a non-profit, independent research and health promotion organization headquartered in New York City with research facilities located in Valhalla, New York. The AHF has pioneered research in cancer prevention, as well as taken a leadership role in health promotion among children with initiatives such as its Know Your Body program for elementary schools. To learn more about AHF, call 212-551-2500, or visit [www.ahf.org](http://www.ahf.org).

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